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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [KJUS](#) [KCRM](#) [PINR](#) [SNAR](#) [ECON](#) [ASEC](#) [HO](#)
SUBJECT: TRUTH SCARIER THAN FICTION: AN ANALYSIS OF
INCREASINGLY HIGH HONDURAN MURDER RATES

REF: A. TEGUCIGALPA 1560

[B](#). TEGUCIGALPA 527

[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Assault rifles, gang-related, nine victims, 15 to 48 years old, early morning, all family members, murdered. It is August 5 in Tegucigalpa, Honduras and the facts of the latest mass murder swirl as you thumb through the local newspapers. You know shock should follow, but it does not. Instead, you mechanically proceed to the next news item. Unfortunately, in the purest sense, this multiple homicide is not news in Honduras; something similar happened the day before, and a couple of days before that, too. In fact, there are so many murders in Honduras that, according to recent CID-Gallup polling data, the number one concern among voters is violent crime (ref A). This is even more significant when one considers the myriad of problems facing the nation. But how violent is Honduras, and is it really more violent than anywhere else? There are no easy answers. The lack of reliable, comprehensive, and transparent data, coupled with abundant speculation and brandishing of unsourced material, frustrates any effort to truly understand the problem.

[1](#)2. (SBU) This report examines various organizations involved with tracking violent deaths in Honduras, methodologies employed, and the limitations inherent to the available data. From this analysis, several conclusions are drawn. For one, while murder statistics vary between sources, underreporting of homicides in Honduras is endemic, and true murder rates are probably even higher than currently being reported by the Government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the media. Secondly, this report finds that the murder rate in Honduras is high compared with its Central American neighbors and the U.S., and is climbing fast in 2003; and that the San Pedro Sula murder rate is exceptionally high (almost four times as high as the Washington, DC murder rate). Finally, this report addresses how the Government and various NGOs in Honduras compile homicide statistics, and how differing uses of the terms "murder" and "extrajudicial killings" further muddle murder-related reporting. END SUMMARY

METHODOLOGY

[1](#)3. (SBU) Much of the information contained in this report comes from an analysis of the murder-related data collected and published by the Public Ministry, the Ministry of Public Security, the San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa morgues, Casa Alianza (an NGO dedicated to the betterment of abandoned Honduran youth), Committee for the Defense of Human Rights in Honduras (CODEH), and Amnesty International. Interviews were conducted with members of these organizations when possible, and considerable time was spent at both morgues observing facilities, procedures, and meeting with forensic doctors and staff. Procedures for conducting preliminary murder investigations were also observed at the Public Ministry's "Integrated Center" in Tegucigalpa. In order to evaluate how murders are reported by the press, an assessment of murders reported by the four nationally circulated newspapers was conducted during the month of June, and several sources familiar with how the media reports on murders, including a newspaper journalist, were interviewed.

MURDER STATISTICS VARY BETWEEN SOURCES

GOH Data Collection Procedures:

[1](#)4. (U) The Public Ministry (MP) and the Ministry of Public Security (MOPS) are the two GOH agencies that serve as repositories for data on crime and violent deaths. The Public Ministry derives its murder count from the nation's two morgues, located in San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa. The morgues also report cause-of-death findings to the MOPS, which treats this information as one component in its broader investigation into whether a death was murder. In practice, however, most cases are not investigated (President Ricardo

Maduro says that each murder investigator is responsible for more than 200 cases, ref B) and the morgue's recommendation often becomes the cause-of-death for MOPS statistics.

Morgue Procedures for Collecting and Reporting Murder Statistics:

15. (U) Theoretically, when a violent death occurs in Honduras a forensic medicine professional arrives at the scene to help determine whether the cause of death was crime related. If it is determined that the death is suspicious, the body is taken to either the San Pedro Sula or Tegucigalpa morgue, depending on jurisdiction. After conducting an autopsy, forensic doctors record the death as a homicide, accident, suicide, natural death, or indeterminable. Each morgue then tabulates monthly and yearly murder statistics from these records.

Discrepancies between MOP and MOPS Murder Statistics:

16. (U) As previously stated, the MP relies on data from the two morgues for its murder statistics. While the MOPS also receives data from the morgue, its murder figures, which are most readily available through the Preventative Police's Sub-Directorate for Information and Analysis (SDIA), are considerably larger than the MP's numbers. This is because the SDIA includes vehicular homicide in its count, while the morgues list these deaths in a separate "accident" category. The MOPS does maintain a database that differentiates vehicular homicide from other murders, but the most widely available, and the most publicly quoted, MOPS murder statistics do include vehicular homicides.

NGO Procedures for Collecting and Reporting Murder Statistics:

17. (U) NGOs that report murder statistics in Honduras also cite varying homicide rates. For example, Casa Alianza compiles statistics on the murder of children and youths in Honduras, but it is difficult to compare Casa Alianza's figures with those of the MP because each organization uses different age categories. While Casa Alianza reports on all murders in which the victim was under 23-years-old, the MP breaks their data down into smaller age groups, including a 20 to 24-year-old grouping. This lumps together murders which fall outside Casa Alianza's purview with the murders counted by the NGO. This problem is compounded further by the fact that the 20 to 24-year-old age group accounts for the largest number of murder victims, making any simple comparison between MP numbers and Casa Alianza numbers impossible. Casa Alianza's numbers differ from those of the MP further, because the organization draws its data exclusively from homicide cases reported by the four nationally circulated newspapers, a not entirely accurate barometer since many murders go unpublished.

18. (U) Other high-profile NGOs that report on the murder problem in Honduras include the Committee for the Defense of Human Rights in Honduras (CODEH) and Amnesty International. CODEH quotes murder rates directly from the SDIA, which, as previously stated, are significantly higher than other sources because they include vehicular homicide. Amnesty International's reporting on murders in Honduras, on the other hand, does not include any actual numbers. The organization astutely notes that "it has been exceptionally difficult to establish with any certainty the number of victims in question."

----- ENDEMIC UNDERREPORTING -----

Victims From Remote Areas Less Likely to Show Up in Government Statistics:

19. (SBU) Information about morgue procedure was obtained from meetings with: Dr. Amilcar Rodas, Director of Forensic Medicine in Tegucigalpa; Dr. Arturo Alvarez, Head of Forensic Pathology in Tegucigalpa; and Dr. Francisco Herrera, Director of Forensic Medicine in San Pedro Sula. According to each of these doctors, the bodies of some murder victims from remote parts of the country never reach either the Tegucigalpa or the San Pedro Sula morgue. Reasons they reported for this included: No one ever called the police, the bodies were dumped somewhere and never found, family members refused to allow bodies to be taken to the morgue, insufficient transportation to move a body, and police not following proper procedure. Consequently, the morgues are actually underreporting the numbers of murders taking place, and the numbers collected and reported by both the MP and the MOPS are also being skewed. None of the three doctors would speculate as to how many murder victims do not reach a morgue, and were doubtful that this number could be determined to even a ballpark figure.

110. (SBU) Wilfredo Hernandez, violent crime reporter for La Tribuna newspaper, also said that not all bodies from rural

areas were transported to the morgue. He reasoned that it was impractical for poor, rural families to allow the bodies to be taken to Tegucigalpa or San Pedro Sula since it was unlikely that justice would be carried out through official channels, and the cost of recuperating the body after the autopsy is exorbitant. Hernandez said that while the MP paid for a body to be transported to a morgue, the family bore the burden of recuperating the body. He estimated that the least expensive box allowed by the morgue cost USD 59, and a truck to transport the body would cost at a minimum USD 29. Additionally, the family would have to pay the morgue for clothing the body, sealing the casket if the body was badly decomposed, and for the official papers needed to bury a cadaver. Hernandez estimated that a rural family allowing a body to be taken to a morgue would need nearly USD 176 to get it back, an exorbitant amount for many in Honduras. Since rural families often place no value on the autopsy, they may never call the police in the first place, or physically prevent the police from transporting the body to a morgue.

Honduran Media Does Not Report All Murders:

11. (U) In an attempt to evaluate the degree to which murders in Honduras were being reported in the press, Political Section interns tracked all murders reported in the four major newspapers, El Herald, La Tribuna, La Prensa and El Tiempo, for the month of June. This is important because these print media sources play a significant role in shaping the public's impression of murder trends in Honduras. Newspaper reporting on murders is also important, because Casa Alianza derives its murder statistics solely from accounts published in newspapers. During the month of June, the newspapers reported on 183 individual murder cases. La Tribuna generally reported more murders daily than the other three newspapers, while El Herald tended to report the fewest, focusing primarily on high profile murders.

12. (SBU) The fact that not even every murder reported by one newspaper is reported by the other newspapers suggested that not all murders are published, and that some selection and exclusion is taking place. Wilfredo Hernandez, violent crime reporter for La Tribuna for the past three years, confirmed that not every murder is reported in Honduran newspapers. Though Hernandez visits the Tegucigalpa morgue every morning, confers with police officers, and visits crime scenes each day, he acknowledged that many of the murders he learns of are not reported by his newspaper. Hernandez said that newspapers generally allot one page per day for murder and violent crime news. He said this usually means three to four articles per day no matter how much news there is to report. According to Hernandez, murders of women and minors tend to receive greater coverage, whereas the more frequent gang-related shootings of 20-something-year-old males receives less attention. Hernandez estimated that his newspaper reports on two-thirds of all the murders he is aware of.

13. (SBU) Hernandez also reported that rural murders are especially prone to going unreported. He said that violent crime newspaper reporters rarely travel more than 20 km outside of San Pedro Sula or Tegucigalpa, and that crime reporting in secondary cities and in the countryside was left to correspondents and special reports. He would not speculate on the number of rural murders that went unreported by the newspapers.

14. (SBU) Another source familiar with the local media's murder reporting, brought to the Political Section's attention by the RSO, said that political pressure on newspapers contributes to the underreporting of violent crime. He said that President Maduro's administration leans on newspapers to limit violent crime reporting. The fact that both El Herald and La Prensa are affiliated with the National Party (President Maduro's party) and tend to report fewer murders than does La Tribuna and El Tiempo, Liberal Party (opposition) affiliated newspapers, seems to affirm that there is some observable link between politics and newspaper murder reporting in Honduras. Note: These four newspapers are the primary means by which the Honduran public receives information on murders and crime trends. Despite the phenomenon of underreporting in the Honduran print media, a climate of fear still pervades the country. It must be assumed that the public would react even more severely if the newspapers were reporting all murders. End Note.

----- NUMBER OF MURDERS IN HONDURAS CLIMBING FAST IN 2003 -----

San Pedro Sula Morgue Reports More Than 50 Percent Increase in Murders Since 2002:

15. (U) Forensic doctors from both the San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa morgues report that they have seen significantly more homicide victims so far this year than during the same period last year. The San Pedro Sula morgue, which receives

bodies from the northern half of the country, and keeps better and more accessible statistics than the Tegucigalpa morgue, reports that through the first six months of 2003 they have performed autopsies on 994 murder victims compared to 628 during the same time period in 2002. This is a 58 percent year-on-year increase. While this augmentation could be partly due to a population increase, the Honduran National Institute of Statistics estimates that the population of Honduras is growing at only 2.6 percent annually.

HONDURAS MURDER RATE HIGHER THAN CENTRAL AMERICAN NEIGHBORS

¶16. (SBU) To make murder statistics comparable between cities and countries with different populations, a murder rate per 100,000 is tabulated. In 2001, based on morgue statistics, the murder rate in Honduras was 29/100,000. In 2002, the murder rate in Honduras climbed to 34/100,000. By comparison, in 2001, according to the RSO in Guatemala City, Guatemala recorded a murder rate of 24/100,000. In 2002, the murder rate in Guatemala climbed to 29/100,000, a number significantly smaller than the rate in Honduras. Similarly, according to numbers available from the RSO in San Salvador, El Salvador's murder rate was 31/100,000 in 2002, which is again lower than in Honduras. As a point of reference, using the FBI statistics on murders, the murder rate for the U.S. as a whole in 2001 was 6/100,000.

2002

Country	# of Murders	Population	Murders/100,000
Honduras	2,205	6,500,000	34
Guatemala	3,631	12,900,000	28
El Salvador	1,925	6,200,000	31

2001

Country	# of Murders	Population	Murders/100,000
Honduras	1,899	6,500,000	29
Guatemala	2,905	12,900,000	24
U.S.	15,980	281,500,000	6

SAN PEDRO SULA MURDER RATE EXTRAORDINARY

¶17. (U) The San Pedro Sula morgue reports conducting 411 autopsies on murder victims from the city of San Pedro Sula during the first six months of 2003. If this trend continues through the end of 2003, there would be 822 murders in San Pedro Sula for the year. Based on a population estimate of 500,000 for the city, the murder rate would be 164/100,000 in San Pedro Sula (SPS) in 2003. By comparison, according to police statistics, in 2002 the District of Columbia (DC) recorded the highest murder rate of any large U.S. city at 46/100,000. In other words, San Pedro Sula is almost four times as violent as Washington, DC.

PROJECTED 2003 SPS MURDER RATE VS. 2002 DC MURDER RATE

City	# of Murders	Population	Murders/100,000
SPS	822	500,000	164
DC	264	572,000	46

CASA ALIANZA REPORTING ACCURATE, BUT MISLEADING ON AGE

Casa Alianza Counts Individuals Under 23-years-of-age as "Children and Youth":

¶18. (U) Casa Alianza's murder reporting in Honduras is focused exclusively on murders in which children and youth are the victims. The organization publishes monthly and yearly reports, as well as intermittent stories about individual homicide cases that exemplify what Casa Alianza considers to be the government's indifference towards the murder of children. The monthly and yearly statistics reported by Casa Alianza are published under the title "Children and Youth Extrajudicially Murdered in Honduras," and come exclusively from the four nationally circulated

newspapers. For these reports, Casa Alianza uses the term "children and youth" to mean anyone under the age of 23. The Honduran Penal Code defines minors as individuals less than 18 years old. Casa Alianza's numbers do not include vehicular homicides, suicides, or drug overdoses.

19. (U) Setting aside Casa Alianza's broad definition of "children and youth," the statistics published by the organization accurately reflect the number of youths murdered in Honduras as reported by local newspapers. A review of the murders recorded by Casa Alianza during June 2003 showed that all were distinct cases published in at least one local newspaper. In fact, Casa Alianza actually erred on the side of underreporting, having missed several published murder cases involving victims under 23-years-of-age. No vehicular homicides, suicides, or drug overdoses were recorded by Casa Alianza as murders during the month of June.

DIFFERING USES OF TERMS "MURDER" AND "EXTRAJUDICIAL KILLING"

20. (U) Any discussion of collecting and reporting murder statistics is incomplete without a discussion of what the term "murder" actually means. In general terms in the U.S., murder is considered to be the intentional and unlawful killing of a human being. There is a wide-ranging use of the term in Honduras, however. The morgues define murder as "death given by one person to another." The MOPS, on the other hand, has a more complicated definition of murder that takes into consideration a criminal investigation, the penal code, and the rulings of judges. For some NGOs, suspicious deaths that have not been categorized as murders by any official entity are at times referred to as murders.

21. (U) The use of the term "extrajudicial killing" is similarly nebulous. Traditionally defined, extrajudicial killing is a murder carried out by someone acting in an unofficial capacity as judge, jury, and executioner. Casa Alianza uses a looser definition and counts every murder of a child or youth as an extrajudicial killing. In fact, in its monthly and yearly reports of extrajudicial killings of children and youth, Casa Alianza includes every murder of a youth published in local newspapers. Amnesty International relies almost exclusively on Casa Alianza's information for its critique of the extrajudicial killing situation in Honduras. CODEH on the other hand, perhaps because of its focus on state involvement in human rights violations, counts murders perpetrated by police officers or soldiers as extrajudicial killings.

CONCLUSION

22. (SBU) Comment: Honduras is a shockingly violent country. There are many theories as to why the murder rate is so astronomically high, including the plethora of AK-47s and other guns left in the region from the 1980s, the high unemployment (and underemployment) rate, the dissolution of families due to heavy illegal immigration to the U.S., the huge number of gang members (estimated to be at least 30,000), and, in some cases, the actions of corrupt security officials. The fact that the police force is understaffed and undertrained, and that the Public Ministry is often ill-equipped to successfully prosecute criminals also contributes the high number of murders. As noted in the Human Rights Report, during 2002 "no perpetrator was identified in an average of 60-70 percent of the killings; gangs were suspected in 15-20 percent of killings; police, private guards, or neighborhood vigilante groups were suspected in 5 percent of killings, and 10-15 percent of killings were drive-by shootings usually involving a truck, often without license plates."

23. (SBU) Comment Continued: What is clear is that the murder rate is high and increasing, especially in San Pedro Sula. Debates over varying figures and interpretations should not cloud the fact that the high murder rate is one of the most critical human rights and law enforcement issues in Honduras, one that has wreaked devastation on a country already challenged by slow economic development, corruption, and natural disasters. It also makes it clear why reform of the justice system is one of the GOH's (and Post's) top priorities. End Comment.
Pierce